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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Terrorism in South America

Terrorism flourishes on the bones of polities. It is the delusion of those who have lost the capacity to distinguish between hope and death.

Irving Howe "The Ultimate Price of Random Terror"

Modern terrorism invites repression. The guerrilla is intent on provoking his enemy--the government--into acts of counter-terrorism so widespread and so brutal that the general public becomes alienated from the government and sympathetic to the subversive cause. The immediate goal, according to Carlos Marighela, the slain Brazilian apostle of urban guerrilla warfare, is that "the political situation of the country will become a military situation, and the acts of violence, the mistakes and various calamities that fall upon the people will be put down to "errors" by the government bodyguards."

As violence begets violence, according to this doctrine, the fabric of society is torn apart, democratic institutions give way to authoritarian decrees, and armed repression supplants political freedom. The aim of terrorism is to make life unbearable for ordinary people, in the hope that they will eventually

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become embittered and exasperated with their government and clamor for change. Such a situation, Marighela argued, could lead to the seizure of power by the guerrillas in what he described as "a climate of collapse." Employed against colonial regimes, such tactics have proven successful, as in British-mandated Palestine and in Cyprus. This hope has not been fulfilled, however, in any Latin American nation. Yet, it is precisely in those countries where political violence has become the major policy preoccupation--Uruguay and Argentina--that terrorism has been the strongest single catalytic force in recent military coups d'etat.

As a political weapon modern terrorism dates from the French Revolution where it was employed by the insurrectionary government to instill fear and respect for new authority in the general populace. Then, as now, terror consisted of symbolic acts designed to influence political behavior by extraordinary means, entailing the use or threat of violence. For example, in Guatemala, Uruguay, and Argentina, leftist guerrillas placed heavy emphasis on the symbolic nature of their violent acts--kidnaping and killing military officers and police chiefs, foreign diplomats, and wealthy businessmen--both domestic and foreign.

The concept of terror may be old, but its effects are magnified by modern technology. The modern terrorist's arsenal includes incendiary devices, sophisticated bombs, and hand-held missiles. Modern psychological studies have provided new techniques of interrogation and intimidation. More important, the conditions of contemporary living and space-age communications systems have facilitated the growth and the impact of urban political violence. Today terrorists feed on the frustrations generated by crowded living conditions dominated by and dependent on technology, and thrive on instantaneous dramatic communication of their acts by the electronic media.

Television and, to a lesser extent, radio have given new meaning to the 19th Century anarchist view of terrorism as propaganda by deed. Now guerrilla groups can attract national or even world attention to their cause. The term "guerrilla theater" is an apt description since terrorism is often drama consisting of:

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- Carefully staged kidnapings, as in the abduction of the Born brothers, two wealthy Argentine industrialists whose seizure by Montonero guerrillas consisted of an elaborate maneuver designed to divert their automobile from most of their bodyguards, in which the terrorists masqueraded as street construction workers and policemen.

- Ritual trials and executions, such as the now famous killing of US AID official Daniel Mitrione by the Tupamaros in Uruguay, or the "capital punishment" of US honorary consul John Egan, after Argentine authorities failed to meet terrorist demands to show several captured guerrillas "alive and well" on television.

Newspapers have also been exploited by Latin American guerrillas. One of the conditions for the release of the Born brothers was the publication of a Montonero advertisement in prominent newspapers all over the world. Roberto Santucho, the recently slain leader of the Argentine Peoples Revolutionary Army, invited correspondents to guerrilla press conferences. One spectacular operation in 1973 saw guerrillas seize the editor of a prominent Buenos Aires newspaper, and insist that the paper print terrorist advertisements--in direct violation of a recently enacted ban on news of guerrilla activities. The newspaper complied with the demands to secure the safe return of its editor, and in retaliation right-wing counter-terrorists sabotaged the printing presses. Farther afield, the terrorist attack at the Munich Olympic Games gained its perpetrators the services of satellite-relayed international television.

Such events dramatically illustrate the fact that terrorist tactics are aimed primarily at the people watching and only incidentally at the victims--who often are innocent bystanders. The random quality of the violence heightens the terror and often exaggerates the actual threat posed by the guerrilla. In reality, guerrilla groups in South America have never posed a direct challenge to any government. Most of the groups have been too small and weak to engage security forces directly, and in the battles that have occurred, as in Argentina, the guerrillas have taken most of the blows. As one scholar has observed, "terror may be the weapon of lonely fanatics or a huddle of conspirators intent upon forcing history through their own self-sacrifice and other people's blood, but rarely is it the weapon of mass movements

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engaged in public politics."

The two most prominent examples of South American nations where terrorism currently exists--Colombia and Argentina--support this viewpoint. Terrorism in Colombia still has many of the characteristics of banditry. Four leftist groups, most of them based in rural areas, commit robberies, armed assaults on police outposts and small army patrols, and kidnapings--occasionally of wealthy Colombians or foreigners who are held for ransom or exploitation. The guerrilla bands do not constitute a serious subversive threat, but they are a continuing source of irritation and concern for security officials.

In Argentina, the Peoples Revolutionary Army (ERP) has lost its image of invincibility after more than a year of harassment by military forces. Hundreds of guerrillas have been killed--including the leader, Roberto Santucho--and even more are in prison. The organization's treasury, once estimated in millions of dollars, is said to have dwindled to about $100,000. In addition, the ERP has lost hideouts, weapons, ammunition, and documents containing valuable operational information. It is doubtful that the ERP will ever regain its former prominence.

The other major Argentine group, the Montoneros, has suffered as well. More than seven months have elapsed since Montonero chieftain Roberto Quieto was captured by security forces. During that period the guerrillas have made no known attempt to free him or to secure his release. One of the reasons for their failure to respond may be that Quieto has cooperated with the security officials. We cannot determine how much the information provided by Quieto has hurt the organization, but lack of recent violent activity suggests that the leftist Peronist guerrillas are on the defensive.

The serious reverses suffered by the ERP may force the remnants of the group to try to link up with the Montoneros, who have long advocated a broad-based "National Liberation Front." Efforts to form such an alliance in the past failed. The Montoneros, in fact, now may be reluctant to affiliate with the survivors because they fear the ERP has been penetrated by the police. Another possibility that is being taken seriously by South American security forces is that several guerrilla groups are forging operative alliances to engage in transnational or international terrorist activities.

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Official concern has been fueled by recent confirmation of the existence of an organization known as the Revolutionary Coordinating Junta, consisting of guerrilla representatives from Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, and possibly Paraguay. The Coordinating Junta was originally organized under the leadership of the Peoples Revolutionary Army, however, and despite reports of representatives based in several European countries, available evidence indicates that its headquarters is still in Argentina and that most of its funds, and probably its members, come from the ERP. If it is indeed a creature of Argentine terrorists, it has probably suffered with the decline in their activity and strength. On the other hand the fact that the Junta has not taken credit for any terrorist operations--as is the customary practice of individual guerrilla organizations--does not mean that it has been inactive. It would appear from captured guerrilla documents that the organization takes its coordinating function seriously and exists for that purpose and to provide logistical support to member groups.

It is the fear that individual guerrilla groups throughout South America will unite that has motivated the recent intensification in cooperation among security officials in the Southern Cone. At present intelligence services in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay share information on terrorist targets, and there are reports of plans to cooperate more extensively.

Despite the fact that guerrillas seem to be losing the battle in Argentina and are only a minor threat elsewhere in South America, it is unlikely that terrorism will disappear. Few terrorist groups anywhere have achieved any of their long range objectives, but the use of terrorist tactics always attracts publicity and frequently wins concessions.

In South America, therefore, political extremists will probably continue to establish links, and form alliances, if only for the sake of convenience in particular operations. The development and deployment of sophisticated small arms and precision-guided munitions and their likely acquisition by terrorists is a serious new threat. On the other hand, the fear that terrorists will obtain and explode nuclear weapons seems to be exaggerated. The survival of any guerrilla movement is contingent on some tacit public support. Mass murder would be counterproductive. Nevertheless, the possibility that guerrillas will threaten to use nuclear weapons in order to take

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advantage of a mass hostage situation cannot be ruled out.

Until now leftist guerrillas in South America have not been completely indiscriminate in their use of terrorist tactics, but have restricted their targets to identified political enemies. In contrast, counterterrorists and in some cases government forces have threatened or murdered prominent liberal members of society not linked in any known way to the guerrillas. This is of course the response that the guerrillas seek. Yet some repressive measures are officially justified and accepted by a frightened population on the grounds that they reduce the effectiveness and attractiveness of terrorism. Greater government controls over the news media with regard to reporting terrorist incidents would diminish the publicity that terrorists apparently crave. A tougher official stance on granting political asylum is already evident in Argentina and Uruguay, and South American countries in general have taken an increasingly tougher stance on yielding to terrorist demands.

Terrorism poses a continuing threat to human liberties and to human life. Last year more people died in Argentina as a result of political violence than have been killed in Northern Ireland in the past five years. In all strategies of terror, there is an inherent tendency to go beyond the limits previously accepted, formally or informally, by both rulers and ruled. It is just this "one step further" that makes terror momentarily effective and, to some people, exciting. Except, perhaps, in the most disciplined kinds of actions against precisely selected individual targets, the strategy of terror can succeed only through a steady abandonment of moral restraints. Regardless of the intentions the terrorists bring to their act, it tends, out of desperation and through repetition, to become increasingly unselective. Indeed it is precisely the increasing unselectivity that makes terrorism so frightening.

There are, however, political limits to the effectiveness of terrorism. Over forty years ago, one scholar, J. B. Hardman, defined those limits:

"As a complete revolutionary tactic terrorism has never attained real success. Governments, whether conservative or revolutionary, are not inclined to retreat before acts of terror directed against key persons. The will to power is not weakened by the exercise of power,

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and positions made vacant through the explosion of bombs are readily filled. On the other hand, the will to revolution requires a stronger force than the heroism of isolated individuals or even of small, well-organized groups. The art of revolution must be sustained by the interested will of a large proportion of the population and by concerted mass operations."

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